

A Burden or Opportunity?

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For the past six years, North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association producers have been involved with age- and source-verification research with North Dakota State University and numerous partners. This partnership led to a successful application to the USDA to provide third-party verification for age and source by the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association.

The CalfAID program was named an official USDA-Agricultural Marketing Service Process Verified Program in 2006. Data collected is processed through the cow herd appraisal performance software for nearly 400 North Dakota cow-calf producers, with a typical herd size of 190 cows, as well as beef producers in many other parts of the country.

In 2004, 2005 and 2006, 14,432 calves were tagged either by the owner of the calves or our NDSU personnel. Combining the three years, 19.5 percent remained on the ranch or farm of birth as replacements.

Of the calves offered for sale, 13 percent were traced to backgrounding lots, 29.3 percent were traced to feedlots and 27.5 percent were traced successfully to the point of harvest. In addition, 10.3 percent never were traced and are considered lost.

Despite the enthusiasm and desire for these cow-calf producers to provide the calf and corresponding data as a marketable package, only one in four calves arrived at harvest with the data package. Costs also were documented.

Many variables exist in the cow-calf business, such as distance traveled, gathering time and number of calves worked. Our best estimate per calf is \$5 for tags, data management and verification; \$7 for working calves, tag placement and documentation; and \$8 for data collection and chute fees through the feeding and harvesting segments.

The total cost estimate per calf worked on the ranch would be \$20 and the total per-calf verified to harvest would be \$56. That is, if one takes into account that only one in four calves actually made it to the packer with the data intact. The one calf must carry the cost of the other three.

In addition, shrink, the lost weight while handling

calves, costs the producer. No one debates the need to move, process and work cattle, but it does cost money.

Calves are living, changing and growing entities. The dollars are made in growth and meant to be profit, not cost recovery.

This weight loss may not seem like much, but it does add up. Our estimates were \$10 to \$20 from each calf's income potential.

Behind the scenes, several very important components are required for preparing a calf and accompanying data package. CalfAID provides source and age verification through data management, electronic animal identification and traceback to the extent possible.

The need for a calving book that records data points along a calf's life is essential. Producer data collection in the calving book is verified by CalfAID to separate conforming and nonconforming calves.

The efficiency of the process is dependent on technology working in environments that are not technology friendly. New high-frequency technology is appealing to cow-calf producers and others who handle cattle.

Recently, high-frequency tags were read with no interference or performance issues at a local livestock auction. A total of 188 calves in 10 different lots sold. The average read time was .338 second per tag, with a 99 percent read rate.

This leap forward connects the calf and the data package and opens the door to track comingled and re-sorted lots of calves. Is this a burden or an opportunity?

The answer brings a mixed response. The verdict certainly is not in on how the market actually will respond. Premiums are evident, certainly advertised, but the point still remains that only one in four of those calves our producers so painstakingly prepared for the market actually have paved the way.

That rate needs to improve throughout the industry.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at <http://www.BeefTalk.com>.

For more information, contact the NDBCIA Office, 1041 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601, or go to <http://www.CHAPS2000.com> on the Internet.

Where are They Now?

Status of 14,432 calves tagged in 2004, 2005 and 2006

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